



*Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast* | **TRANSCRIPT**  
Episode 11: Humanities Indicators Project

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**\*\*Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.\*\***

**Participants:**

Trevor Parry-Giles

Robert Townsend

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**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

**Introduction:**

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Welcome back to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. Regular listeners of this podcast will recall that Episode 5 of *Communication Matters* addressed the public humanities with our discussion featuring our friends at the National Humanities Alliance. Today we'll be continuing our discussion about the role of the humanities and public life with a focus on the American Academy of Arts and Sciences or AAAS Humanities Indicators Project. Robert B. Townsend, the director of the Humanities Indicators Project and director of the AAAS Washington office joins me for a conversation about the latest humanities indicators and some of the trends in the humanities and in communication especially. First, a bit about Dr. Townsend. Prior to joining AAAS, Rob Townsend spent 24 years working in a variety of capacities for the American Historical Association. Dr. Townsend has authored more than 200 articles on various aspects of history, higher education and electronic publishing and is the author of the book, *Histories Babel: Scholarship Professionalization and the Historical Enterprise in the United States*.



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Now the Humanities Indicators Project are developed from existing data sets and from the humanities departmental survey administered by AAAS to about 1,400 four-year college and university humanities departments. The departmental survey was first administered in 2008 and collected data on the 2007/2008 academic year. That first survey did not include the communication discipline. We were included in the second survey conducted from 2012 to 2013 and today Dr. Townsend will be discussing the newly released results of the third humanities departmental survey. Hey. Welcome to the podcast, Rob. I'm glad you could join me today.

**Robert Townsend:**

Thanks, Trevor. Great to be here.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

To start, can you tell our listeners a little bit more about the Humanities Indicators Project and what it's all about and why we engage in this collection of indicators?

**Robert Townsend:**

The origins of the indicators goes back to the late 90s when the first notion of STEM started develop and the leaders of the academy noticed that the science folks were using federally mandated science and engineering indicators which is a large data set that the National Science Foundation collects. And I think the language used at the time was that they were eating our lunch because they had more information about the health of their fields and what the status and the trend lines were for those fields. So, they decided that we should get into that as well. And so, the academy developed originally it was conceived of as a pilot for the National Endowment for the Humanities. We would develop this data set and that hopefully the NEH would take it up. And so, we first published the pilot online in 2009. I think at the time that NEH said they did not want to receive that gift. And so, the academy found funding from the Mellon Foundation to keep it going. So, we're still doing this as a running enterprise and we're updating it on an ongoing basis as new data comes out.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

So, what kind of value do you think all of these indicators have for researchers, for policymakers, scholarly associations like NCA? Is there some lesson from science and engineering, for example, that we can call from about the value of this data?

**Robert Townsend:**

Well, I mean in a lot of cases the data helps disprove myths and people's expectations. In other cases, it proves what people fear. I mean certainly communication is sort of an exception but when we look at the trends for a lot of the other humanities disciplines, we see clear declines in the past really since the Great Recession. And so, on that measure, we certainly see some evidence that validates the concerns that we hear from a lot of departments. But at the same time,



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we look at other metrics such as liberal arts degrees awarded in community colleges or trends in people visiting historic sites and museums, those sorts of things and those look more positive. So, it at least allows us to provide a more grounded conversation about the health of the humanities than I think that existed prior to the existence of the indicators.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

So, along with curating existing data that's already out in the world and that's produced by other folks, you also conduct your own survey, the humanities departmental survey. And I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how that survey was developed and how the questions evolved. And from my particular vantage point, I'm interested in how you've generated the new disciplines that you've added over the roughly 10/11/12 years that you've been doing this.

**Robert Townsend:**

Yeah. I mean originally we developed it because the federal government stopped gathering data about faculty. And so, we saw that as a really key component of the sort of information we needed to know. We needed to understand how many part-time faculty there are compared to the number of full-time faculty. And so, being able to just track that seemed really key to us. So, at the time, I was still working for the American Historical Association and I worked with the academy. Basically, we took the department survey that I had been doing for the American Historical Association for many years and simply expanded that to try and provide some basic benchmarking data about students and faculty. And so, that was the first iteration of the survey which, as you said, we did in 2008 and we included only eight disciplines at that time.

So, we asked those sort of basic questions with that first one. And then in 2012, we started looking around. We wanted to include some more disciplines and obviously communication was one that thanks to the pressure from certain members of the staff at the National Communication Association pointing out, that we really needed to include communication as an important aspect of the humanities. We included it in that survey and we also expanded the survey questions to try and address some emerging questions for the field such as say digital humanities or career-oriented sorts of challenges and problems for the field. So, we did that in 2012. So, that was when we first included communication. And then when we came back around, the Mellon Foundation encouraged us to take another run at it. And so, we've now got 10 years' worth of data for some fields and now five years of some comparative data for communication that we can look at as well. So, that's what the third iteration is able to tell us.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

How many responses did you get from communication departments this particular go-around?



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**Robert Townsend:**

So, we based this on a sample. So, it was a sample of 141 communication departments that were designed to provide a representative slice of different degree levels, different types of Carnegie institutions. So, that was how we developed it. And we had a 59% response rate which was good but not quite as good as we would have hoped. And so, as you'll see in some of the data points, there's enough standard error in the results of our estimates to just produce some flags for cautions about interpreting it just because of that margin of error got to be a little large which is interesting in and of itself because it suggests that some of these departments sort of represent one extreme and some represent the other.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

From our perspective as a discipline, of course, one of the key findings from the 2013 departmental survey was that communication had the largest number of conferred degrees amongst the disciplines surveyed in the departmental survey for 2011 and 2012 and there was like 59,810 degrees conferred amongst the sample departments, average of about 78 per department. I'm wondering has that changed in the most recent survey? And what does that tell us or does it tell us anything or should we take any lessons there about the popularity of communication and what that might say about the state of the humanities more broadly?

**Robert Townsend:**

Well, the estimated number is down slightly. So, the average is 73 per department but when you take that margin of error into account, we don't see a statistically significant change. So, the upper range is higher than 78; the lower range is right about where it is. So, from that perspective, we don't see a statistically significant change and it's still awarding the largest number of degrees in the humanities departments we surveyed by a very wide margin. And I looked at how many institutions are awarding degrees in different disciplines over time and communication is really the only humanities discipline that we looked at where there was a clear increase in the number of institutions that were awarding degrees in the subject. So, it's a 5% increase from 2012 to 2017 which stood out. I mean most of the others had seen at least a slight decline. English saw a tiny, tiny increase. I mean it was almost zero. It was basically a rounding error. But so, communication was really fascinating just as an interesting sort of point of comparison.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

It's useful to note that the way that the survey and AAAS defines communication is to specifically as I recall exclude sort of pre-professional programs in communications. We're going for the sort of mainstream bona fide communication department at normal colleges and universities. Is that right as opposed to say specialized—I don't know—journalism programs or public relations programs, that kind of thing?



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**Robert Townsend:**

Yeah. So, we've only basically surveyed communication programs as part of this. If they happen to have a journalism program within that—and that is one of the questions we ask. I mean communication stands out because it has an unusually large number of journalism and those sorts of programs contained within the communication program. And we didn't ask the departments to exclude those from the survey responses. We simply didn't survey journalism programs specifically.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Right, right. Do you think there are any lessons about the fact that communication has maintained a certain popularity for the state of the humanities when we know that so many other of the humanities are seeing declines in majors and conferred degrees? I'm wondering—I don't know—I'm speculating here, spit balling, right?—are there any lessons to be drawn there about the humanities generally?

**Robert Townsend:**

Well, I mean my theory and I say this as a parent of two English majors and one communication major is that it's partially just a function of there's a perception of a clear trajectory into the job market from communication than there is from a lot of the other disciplines. And so, I think it allows a student engage in humanities sorts of practices and studies and subjects with that reassurance I think.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

I'm interested in how that question about career readiness folds back perhaps on the data that you all collect about assessments and the determination of how students actually see their department and whether or not departments are effective looking at how well a class of students does according to specific measures. In the 2013 survey, 90% of communication departments were measuring learning outcomes using some mechanism of assessment and we were second as a discipline amongst all those that were surveyed. Has that rate of assessments increased? I'm wondering why it is that there's disparity with assessments. I'm always assuming that higher administrations are telling departments regardless of who they are that they have to engage in these assessments. So, I'm wondering about that disparity and if you think there's any value to these regular assessments for learning, for teaching, that kind of thing.

**Robert Townsend:**

Yeah. I mean it probably says something that we changed that question this year and in large measure because a number of the other humanities departments didn't understand what that question meant. So, for this year, we asked a narrower question which was simply do you have benchmark practices for your majors, do you require a paper or a thesis or a test before they finish. And communication stood out for having a relatively small share of people of departments



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that said they were doing some form of benchmarking. I mean it's still 65% of the department said they did some form of benchmarking but that compares to 71%. So, I mean it's a small difference. But also striking was that a very large share said I mean whereas like history and most of them said they required a paper or thesis. In communication, half of the respondents said that they use some other form of testing. So, I mean obviously that's a question you and I think need to revisit just to figure out like how do we get a question and I think anthropology was in a similar sort of position that clearly there's some language gap between the older humanities. Communication goes back rhetoric. We could say it's the oldest but—

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

It is the oldest.

**Robert Townsend:**

There we go. But some of the, shall we say, the fustier and crustier humanities departments in terms of their means of assessment relative to those that are more on the cusp of other disciplines and practices. I think that would be a good way of thinking about it.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

That's interesting. I do want to ask you too about a particularly timely question that emerged from the departmental survey in the humanities departmental survey and that has to do with online teaching. And I think there's a lot of fear out there in the higher education sector overall that all of this coronavirus pandemic drama will result in a huge spike in online teaching and administrators are going to see that they can just have people teach online and it's cheaper and yada, yada, yada. I'm wondering if there any lessons from the departmental survey. We know that 30% of communication departments had one or more faculty members who either specialized in the digital humanities which is kind of a different thing but they also report that communication departments had the largest share of departments that were offering online courses which is sort of an interesting development. I'm wondering if you could comment on any of the trends that you've seen in online education with these surveys and what that might tell us about our current state of things.

**Robert Townsend:**

Well, no, I mean that was one of the data points and I actually shared this with Inside Higher Ed earlier just because I felt like it was something people need to understand. That was 70% of the humanities departments in our survey weren't teaching even one online course as we went into this I mean based on our data and that was essentially unchanged from the data from 2012. So, that really speaks to how high a climb there is for a lot of these departments if they're not even teaching a single course, the amount of experience and practice that they have with that sort of thing is really quite striking. And I think that's probably going to be a story that we need to explore considerably more as we go into this. Communication, again, stood out in that 41 % of the



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department said that they were teaching an online course compared to 30% of the other responding disciplines. So, I think it is a potentially interesting area of a further study. I'd certainly like to look at it. On the subject of digital humanities, I mean I didn't find it interesting that 30% of the communication departments said they had a specialist in the field but only 21% reported they had guidelines for evaluating digital publications for promotion and tenure. So, that was another data point that I—and mind you, every one of the disciplines we looked at has that sort of 10% to 15% point gap between the share of faculty and the share of T&P evaluation guidelines. And I think that there again it's another sort of interesting data point. I think it's worthy of further discussion and exploration.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Yeah. I think so to. And I'm wondering too if there's a gap maybe between how do departments view digital humanities work and digital publications. Because you talk about a digital publication and that suddenly sounds kind of creepy and un-peer reviewed but if you're talking about digital humanities work, that could be an interesting other dimension to how the digital humanities are influencing tenure and promotion dynamics. I don't know.

**Robert Townsend:**

Well, and I also wonder just how much—I mean we saw this in with public humanities some years ago where 20 years ago in history, for instance, every department felt like they needed to have one public historian so that the rest of the faculty could ignore it and leave that to the person that they'd hire. And I do wonder to some extent whether we aren't seeing a similar trend with the digital humanities as well.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Another outgrowth I think of this COVID pandemic is some very real concern by graduate students about the job market, about the prospects for higher education generally in the next 5-10 years. And those pressures existed prior to the pandemic; they're now amplified I think pretty high. The 2013 survey had communication as the third most popular of the graduate offerings in the surveys with about 14,000 graduate students across the departments and that's exciting from our standpoint. Seventy-two percent of those students reported receiving full financial support or actually, the students didn't report it but the department's said that they funded their graduate students fully.

**Robert Townsend:**

Doctoral students.



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**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Doctoral students. And that's a third overall of the humanities programs. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about what the new survey might tell us about graduate student support, the factors affecting the level of support, that kind of thing.

**Robert Townsend:**

I mean one of the things that concerns me about this report at the moment is just whether it's going to look like a snapshot from a different era to that extent. We captured a moment in time and that's what we've got to report. I mean we did see an increase. I mean we couldn't calculate as a statistically significant increase but the estimate is that there were over 17,000 communication graduate students as of 2017 which was an average of 57 per department that awards graduate degrees. So, certainly the estimate is certainly up from what it was the last time. And the share of doctoral students was basically the same in terms of full support. It was about 79% this time that said they had full support which was pretty much the average relative to the other fields in terms of support. I think the question going forward is just where that goes. I mean the reports I'm hearing from colleges and universities around the country just in terms of their financial situations sound really, really grim. I was talking to a dean the other day who was saying that he's worried that 10% to 20% of the students at their university might not come back. I mean that's the pre-existing students and they're expecting an even bigger drop in admissions potentially just because students either don't feel supported by the experience of online or they're just concerned about making a move and then having to move back again. I mean when you think about the financial implications of that, it's really quite terrifying for those of us who care about the health of our disciplines.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Well, and you have to begin to wonder to what extent states and state governments at least in the public education sector are going to have to step up and really provide some buttressing to their state universities. But again, you're right. That's off topic. I know a lot of communication departments, returning to graduate students, are concerned as well because many communication graduate students are international students or temporary visa holders and the extent to which that constricts as a result of the pandemic can really have an impact on a lot of communication departments as well.

There's another trend in higher education that I wanted to mention that emerge from the departmental survey and that's the increasing number of adjunct or part-time faculty. I know that in the 2013 survey, it found that there were nearly as many neither tenured nor tenure-track part-time faculty as there were tenured faculty members in communication. In other words, we're about 50/50 as I recall and that places us maybe at the top of the disciplines that you survey in terms of that dynamic. Have those statistics changed at all since 2013 and what does that tell us about larger trends in the humanities specifically, academy overall, etc.?





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**Robert Townsend:**

I mean one of the striking things about our survey now I mean given that this is 10 years of data is how little change there has been in these percentages across all the humanities in these four-year college and university departments. So, to the extent I go to meetings regularly and I hear people say all the tenure track lines are being replaced by adjuncts, I mean our data simply doesn't show that. Mind you, communication stands out for that 50/50 split. Most of the other humanities disciplines at four-year colleges and universities, it's closer to a 60/40 split or higher. And so, to the extent that it's kind of a category difference with communication, I'm not sure I mean because I mean we do see higher percentages of adjunct faculty in disciplines that have a high reliance on practitioners to serve as teaching faculty. So, I mean people like me who are teaching have a full-time job and are teaching a course on the side as opposed to the sort of more common conception of what an adjunct is as the freeway flyer who's trying to string together five jobs. And that's something that we can't quite get down to that level to get a better understanding of that. That actually was the sort of data that we got out of the federal survey that we really missed because being able to discern how many people are really abused adjuncts as opposed to people who are simply people who are avocational faculty I think is a really important aspect of this whole question that we really need to get a better handle on I think.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Right. Because I think in comm at least we've always assumed that it's more the latter than the former and that one of the driving forces here is because often on many colleges and university campuses, we're offering a general education requirement, something along the lines of a public speaking or a hybrid course, introductory course to communication and those can often be taught very successfully by the type of part-time practitioner sorts of adjuncts that you refer to and not the abused adjunct faculty members stringing together five different courses at five different universities around the beltway. So, yeah, it is a shame that we can't tease that out a little bit more. It sounds to me, Rob, and maybe you might disagree with this but this adjunct question is sort of half-empty/half-full. In other words, some disciplines do confront this and this is an ongoing concern but it's not really changing that much.

**Robert Townsend:**

Yeah. I mean we're not seeing clear evidence of change. I think the real question is I mean in part where PhDs—in most cases, we saw a drop of 30% or more in terms of the number of academic jobs following the recession to where we are now. And the number of PhDs in most of the humanities disciplines have sort of been clicking along at the same level all along. So, where those PhDs are finding work I think would be a really useful question and I mean there's some evidence I think that more of them are finding jobs in community colleges which means they're more likely to be adjuncts. It tends to be the inverse percentage of full-time versus part-time faculty at community colleges and since we weren't able to survey them because they don't have departments in the same way, that sort of thing, I think that's an understudied area to the extent



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that they're simply raising their standards. Where they used to hire a Master's, now they're hiring PhDs. That I think is an important question we need to study a little bit more because certainly the national trends across the board show an increase in the share of adjunct faculty. The fact that we're not seeing it in humanities departments at four-year colleges and universities creates a certain sort of disconnect between what we see in these big numbers and what's happening in this sector of the higher end. And of course, how that will change after this year I guess will be the next question.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Yeah. Well, and to what extent this current pandemic and all of the changes that it's bringing about are going to be permanent or if they're going to be sort of short and medium-term changes. We're all trying to figure that out I suspect. When do you think the next departmental survey is going to be conducted? Do you think we're going to do this again? Do you expect to uncover different results? And interestingly, how do you think this COVID situation might influence the outcome of that next survey assuming you do it in the next five years?

**Robert Townsend:**

So, I mean it's sort of a complex question because I've already talked to Mellon about planning to do another one in five years. But I mean as a result of all this and some of these conversations I've been having, I'm actually thinking maybe I should do a pared down version of the survey looking back maybe at this year or maybe next year or next fall just to come back and see how these benchmarks have changed a number of these things. I mean like how much hiring is going on since that's one of the questions we ask and what change there has been in the take-up of online education and what it's done to enrollments. I think those three things are really something I'd love to be able to really get a sense on because I mean by all accounts, we're seeing some really dramatic changes and I think that given that we've got kind of a benchmark, it'd be really useful to see how that benchmark might be changing on some of these key metrics.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

I agree.

**Robert Townsend:**

So, we'll either be back in a year or so or we'll be looking four years, five years down the road to doing the next survey.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

Well, on behalf of all of us at NCA and in the communication discipline, we're so thankful that you've included communication in this departmental survey process over the last I guess eight years, nine years and the last two surveys. And I want to thank you again, Rob, for joining me today. And listeners, I want to encourage you all to look at the humanities indicators at



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HumanitiesIndicators.org. I also encourage you to visit the NCA website, [natcom.org](http://natcom.org). We often will distill and/or publicize much of the data that Rob and his colleagues are coming up with over at Humanities Indicators and putting those into reports or other forms of data about the discipline. So, that includes data about general information on programs, outcomes for doctoral students, a whole lot more. But thanks again, Rob, for joining us on *Communication Matters*.

**Robert Townsend:**

Thanks so much, Trevor. It's great to talk to you.

**Trevor Parry-Giles:**

All right. Listeners, thanks again for joining us on *Communication Matters*, the NCA podcast. In NCA news, NCA has compiled some new resources related to the COVID-19 pandemic. NCA's online learning resources page now includes a sampling of free-to-access NCA journal articles that are related to communication amidst crises and disasters. You can visit [natcom.org/online-teaching](http://natcom.org/online-teaching). That's [natcom.org/online-teaching](http://natcom.org/online-teaching) to read these articles. And visit NCA's YouTube page to view a playlist on COVID-19 resources such as a National Humanities Alliance video aimed at discussing the recently passed CARES Act and the benefits of that act for humanities organizations. Also, in NCA news, as a reminder, beginning on June 1st, the CRTNET Listserv will no longer be active. Current CRTNET subscribers and all other interested parties can sign up for and contribute to NCA's new email blast Comm Notes. NCA members will automatically receive Comm Notes and anybody else can subscribe today at [natcom.org/CommNotes-Subscription](http://natcom.org/CommNotes-Subscription). To subscribe, again check [.org/CommNotes-Subscription](http://natcom.org/CommNotes-Subscription).

Finally, NCA would like to recognize the work of all of our communication graduates. We know that the unprecedented events of the last few months have shaped your college experiences in ways that you never thought possible. And so, we congratulate you on completing your degrees and wish you all the best in your future endeavors. Listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the June 11th episode of *Communication Matters* which will focus on a Journal of Applied Communication Research special forum about food insecurity. Professors Megan K. Schraedley and Marianne LeGreco will join the podcast to discuss research on communication and food insecurity including the unique forum that began as a Facebook conversation and that appears in the Journal of Applied Communication Research, the challenges facing scholars and practitioners working in this area and the possibilities for future research about food insecurity. I hope you'll tune in for this insightful conversation on June 11th.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.



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**Conclusion:**

*Communication Matters* is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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